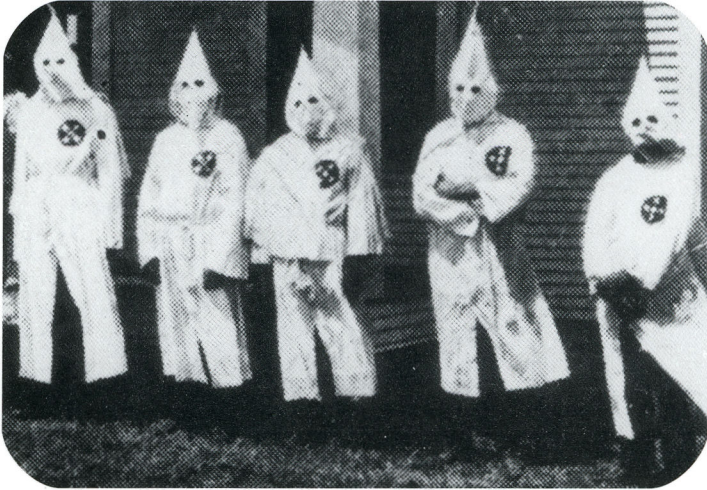


The Tale of Sergeant Webber



Nativism in Northern Oklahoma in 1923

*By Jim Showalter**

In Payne County, Oklahoma, from 1921 through 1923, the Ku Klux Klan grew to become a major institution claiming 1,800 members within seven months of its first public appearance in the county.¹ Publicly, the Klan appeared in three parades (all occurring between June 16 and July 4, 1922), four naturalizations (initiations), at least six church visits, and two information events for the non-Klan public.² Klan halls existed in Stillwater and Cushing. In Yale Klan members met in the Yale Garage, and at

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least one other klavern was in the county at Ripley. The county's klaverns were essentially nonviolent.³ Before its precipitous decline following 1924, people in the county widely accepted the Klan as a successful county institution.

Explaining why each Klan member joined the hooded fraternity is impossible now. The now-dominant revisionist school in Klan studies was built in part on the study of Klan rolls.⁴ Even in places with rolls, though, discovering individual motivation is a moot exercise, and in most places, including Payne County, there are no Klan membership rolls. In lieu of pursuing the ephemeral motivations of individual membership, one should look at the Klan as an institution in Payne County and ask why Payne countians so broadly accepted it in the years from 1921 to 1923. The Klan's ideas did not lead to its startling success as an institution. The ideas of the Klan simply helped the Klan gain entree into the county: they were readily recognizable ideas. It is the thesis of this work that the Klan's popularity within Payne County was due in part to two non-ideological reasons. there was a general "joining frenzy" in the county that helped give the Klan an impressive membership, and the Klan's public events were great spectacle. To better understand why ideas were probably not the cause of the Klan's spectacular rise, this essay will examine the rather meteoric career of a nativist street speaker, Sgt. William F. Webber, who suddenly appeared in the hot summer of 1923 and just as suddenly disappeared. In many ways, his rise to public prominence is like that of the Klan.

In the early 1920s Payne County, Oklahoma, was evenly split between urban and rural people. Both of the county's major commodities, oil and agriculture, were in a depressed state due to the recession of 1920–1921. In 1920, the county had 30,180 residents according to the 1920 U. S. Census, with 93.5 percent native-born whites and 4.0 percent blacks.⁵

The county was strongly white and Protestant. In the religious census of 1926, 9,975 countians claimed church membership. The five largest Protestant denominations in the county—the Disciples of Christ, Northern Methodists, Southern Baptists, Presbyterians, and Evangelical United Brethren—accounted for 70.2 percent of all churched. The major Protestant churches were evangelical and cooperative, one with the other.⁶ The county's churched also included 8 percent Roman Catholic and 7.4 percent in black Protestant churches.⁷ These, and a few Jews and others, accounted for the 20.7 percent of the churched who were not evangelical, white Protestants.⁸

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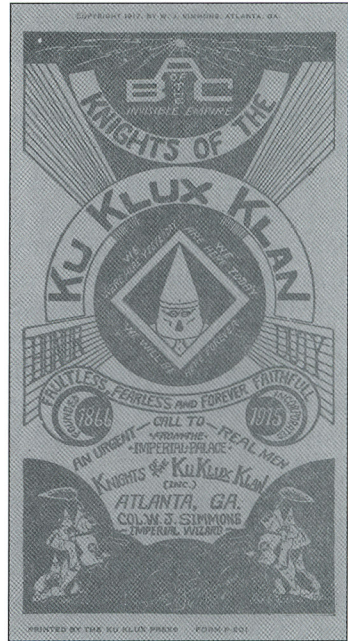
The major white Protestant denominations seemed to dominate the county and its moral outlook. Newspapers weekly carried news of the churches, often on their front pages, but they almost never mentioned black churches, Roman Catholics, or others. There were other signs of the county's Protestantness. Revivals occurred across the county throughout the year, Sunday Schools were large with attendance booming, and many countians spent all day Sunday, plus Wednesday nights, attending church. The mainline white Protestant denominations were arguably the most respected institutions in the county. The message preached by these churches was that of a very traditional moral code.⁹

Besides traditional Protestant morals, the values of the county in 1923 revolved around the phrase "100% Americanism." It was assumed everyone knew the meaning of the phrase; it was an umbrella that sheltered many forms of nativism. Nativism included fear of threats to patriotism and fear of foreigners with "un-American" ideas and habits. It included attacks on "slackers" from World War I, and it was implicitly racist, reinforcing the Jim Crow laws then in effect. The county's concerns for "100% Americanism" also stemmed from the vilification of dissent during the war, the Russian Revolution that spread fear of Bolsheviks and Reds leading to the Red Scare of 1919, and national labor unrest after the war, which conservatives often laid at the door of radicals and foreign agitators. That broad consensus explicitly included traditional Protestant assumptions about family and personal morals. In short, "100% Americanism," never a systematic philosophy, was a package of fears and affirmations that the white countians understood.

In addition to the county's Protestantness and its acceptance of broad nativist ideas, the early 1920s was a period of "joining" in Payne County. Organizations of many kinds either increased in size or first appeared in the county during the war and immediate post-war period. New groups included the American Legion, Chambers of Commerce and Retail Merchants' Associations, Rotary and Lions Clubs, the League of Women Voters, the Stillwater Business and Professional Women's Club, the re-born and rejuvenated Farmers' Union which swept the rural half of the county, and the Ku Klux Klan. Traditional fraternal associations seemed to be growing, especially the Masons, despite national trends to the contrary.¹⁰ The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the Federated Women's Club had establishments throughout the county. Churches also boomed, often holding races to beat the previous

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The KKK distributed literature such as this pamphlet at meetings in Payne and Creek counties. Klansmen at Okmulgee in Creek County (p. 82) stand in front of the new house they provided to a local widow (Courtesy D. Earl Newsom, right; courtesy Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, p. 82).



year's membership numbers or to reach some goal in Sunday School attendance.

The association that seemed to have grown the fastest was the Klan. If the Klan actually had 1,800 members in July, 1922, then the Klan was larger than all organizations in the county, other than the Democratic and Republican parties, the Disciples of Christ, the Northern Methodists, and the Farmers' Union. For many men, the Klan represented generally accepted ideas about male organizations, fraternalism without complexity, and militancy without military service. But how did the Klan, without an identified constituency like the American Legion, Rotary Clubs, or the other groups, and without a unique ideology, attract so much support so quickly? The brief public career of Sgt. William Webber can suggest some answers.

Sergeant Webber appeared in June, 1923, a propitious time for rabble-rousers. The president of Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College in Stillwater, James B. Eskridge, had been fired by Gov. John C. Walton. Walton appointed George Wilson to the position in May, 1923, in an attempt to keep his political allies on the left, the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League. Wilson was the man-

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ager of the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League, an organization to whose "Shawnee Platform" candidate Walton had subscribed in the 1922 campaign.

Opponents labeled Wilson and his organization, plus many of Walton's advisors, as socialists. Wilson proposed making the college every man's school, with a tendency on his part to slight academics and research in favor of practical instruction. When he was appointed, several professors resigned from the school in protest. Stillwater residents held rallies and sent a delegation to the governor. Walton was not pleased with Stillwater's reaction and threatened the city with martial law. Wilson eventually spent several days on campus, guarded by highway patrolmen. Meanwhile, pressure on the governor mounted throughout the state. Walton soon had second thoughts, and Wilson was forced to resign in late July, 1923.¹¹

At the same time as the Wilson affair was being played out in Payne County, Walton began his struggle against the "whipping parties" he claimed were ravaging the state. Most observers then and now interpret his move as an attempt to distract the public gaze from his own failure to work with the state legislature. Whatever his reasons, Walton soon declared martial law in selected cities, and eventually the whole state, as he carried out a much-



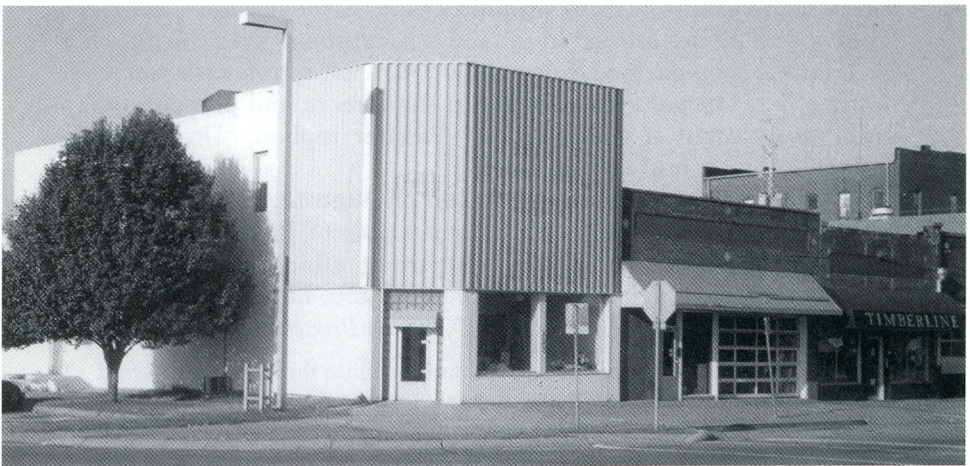
The Charles Hotel (above) in Cushing was a favorite early-day meeting place for the local Klan. The Stillwater Klan met in a building, which still stands, at 123 E. Ninth (opposite) (Courtesy D. Earl Newsom).

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publicized fight against the Ku Klux Klan, which he blamed for much of the violence. In November, 1923, after a constitutional crisis and a Supreme Court decision allowing the state legislature to call itself into session in the case of an impeachment charge, that body convicted and removed Walton from office.¹²

In the midst of those tumultuous times, Sergeant Webber briefly shot across the landscape of Payne County. On June 13, Arch Flood of Cushing swore out a complaint of public drunkenness against a "street speaker," William Franklin "Sargeant" Webber. Flood claimed to have observed the sergeant drunk on a street in Cushing on June 4. Judge Brown Moore in Stillwater, a man described as a pro-Walton Democrat, issued an arrest warrant. Sheriff A. J. Tull made the arrest but later told the newspaper that he thought it was a frame-up.¹³

Cushing attorney Walter Mathews represented the plaintiff, as he had defended him in several previous matters, including a charge of moonshining to which Flood pleaded guilty. Mathews had been whipped the previous September by thirteen men, two from Cushing and the others from Shamrock in Creek County. The Cushing men included John Foster, a long-time businessman and the head of the Ku Klux Klan in Cushing, and Rev. Bert Salmon of the Disciples of Christ Church in Cushing, who also was in the Cushing Klavern. All the men in the whipping party were eventually acquitted, despite being identified in court by Matthews.¹⁴



The Yale Record		
YALE, OKLAHOMA, THURSDAY OCT. 5, 1922		
<p>Lauderdale-Retherford</p> <p>Mr. Robert Lauderdale and Miss Glema Retherford were quietly married at Wichita, Kansas, September 25.</p> <p>This worthy young couple certainly pulled off a quiet wedding as their most intimate friends knew nothing of the occasion until the past few days.</p> <p>Miss Retherford is one of the finest most highly respected young ladies, who had won the host of friends with her charming personality and pleasing ways.</p> <p>Mr. Lauderdale is the oldest son of Will Lauderdale, Vice President of the First National Bank in Yale. He has grown to manhood in Yale and is one of Yale's promising young men. He is serving as assistant cashier of the above named bank.</p> <p>The Record joins with their friends in wishing</p>	<p>Thousands Witness Ku Klux Klan Outdoor Ceremonies</p> <p>Wednesday evening about 5 o'clock an aeroplane circled over the city with three large letters K. K. K. painted across the bottom and the crew threw out handbills stating there would be an open air public initiation on the west mound of the Twin Mounds 6 miles west of Yale Wednesday night.</p> <p>By dark the road west of town was lined with cars and it is reported that close to 3000 cars was parked around the mound and close to 10,000 people were present to witness something like 300 new members taken into the Klan. About 8:30 an aeroplane circled over the crowd with a fiery cross on it that looked very beautiful. The services lasted until about midnight, with hundreds of Klansmen dressed in full regalia directing the crowd where to go.</p> <p>Everything went along smoothly with no trouble whatever and from all reports the public will long remember the spectacle they saw on the Mound Wednesday night.</p>	<p>C. OF C. LUNCHEON</p> <p>There was a good representation at the Yale Chamber of Commerce Luncheon at the Elk Hotel last Friday and several matters of importance taken up and discussed.</p> <p>The proposition of the City Government was taken up and all present were unanimous in favor of the present form of City Government.</p> <p>They voted to give the Athletic Association \$55.00 to buy uniforms and equipment with.</p> <p>Miss Tucker, Red Cross Representative of Southwestern Division Headquarters at St. Louis was present and gave a very interesting as well as an educational talk which was certainly appreciated by all present. The Roll Call for membership will start November 11th.</p> <p>Mrs. Jennie Reed, Local Red Cross Secretary also was present.</p>
<p>State President, Don Frier, Secretary, E. R. Boller, read the program of the Southwestern Division.</p>		

Area newspapers sometimes reported on Klan activities, especially when they involved spectacle (Taken from Yale Record, October 5, 1922).

When news of Webber's arrest became known, members of the American Legion post in Stillwater and a group of fifteen Stillwater men hurried to the local courthouse and forced an immediate court hearing for Webber. Some of the men arrived at the courthouse in Stillwater before Webber's arrival at 8:00 P.M. That hot evening in June, 1923, Judge Moore was forced to hold a quick hearing and set bail, which various citizens promptly paid. After the court hearing, Webber and Moore argued in the judge's chambers over the date for his trial. As they parted, Moore said, "I will not argue with you here in my office, but you can go camp in the streets and preach my funeral every night if you want to." Webber replied, "Don't Worry, Judge, I'll Lay it on," and he did.¹⁵

With his arrest and immediate bail on June 13, Webber began a speaking journey through the urban areas of Payne County. He spoke in Stillwater the night of his hearing, after which he hurried to the American Legion hall for a fete. There, he claimed to be an "ex-secret service and Legion man." The *Stillwater Gazette* stated.

Maj. J. B. Pate, in a brief speech, commended him for his "fearless and open stand" against the "reds," the bolsheviks, the communists, the socialists and the I.W.W. [International Workers of the World] organization, and proposed that a collection be taken for the speaker. A letter of endorsement from the post was ordered prepared.¹⁶

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Webber continued to speak on Stillwater streets on June 14. The next morning he went to Cushing where an interesting confrontation occurred as the sergeant lectured in the streets. The *Stillwater Advance-Democrat* stated.

[Webber] made some remarks in his last talk Thursday night about Mrs. A. L. Bowline that he retracted Friday night when faced by A. L. Bowline in Cushing, so he signed [the] following:

"To Whom It may Concern. I did not mean to infer that Mrs. Bowline, in using the New Republic in her classes, is herself representing socialism, free love, bolshevism or any 'red' tendencies whatsoever."

Sergeant William F. Webster¹⁷

The editor of the *Yale Democrat* reported Webber speaking in Yale in the afternoon and evening and that he hit "socialists, the reds, the I. W. W.s and others," and also gave "several packages to Judge Brown Moore and to Arch Flood."¹⁸ He was expected on June 19 in the oil-boom town of Ripley. More than 200 citizens came out that evening to hear Webber, but he had automobile problems which delayed and then canceled his appearance: "It was after 10 o'clock before the crowd dispersed upon learning that it would be impossible for the speaker to get here in time for a talk."¹⁹ Webber re-scheduled for the evening of June 21, and the crowds returned to downtown Ripley. The *Ripley Record* reported.

An immense crowd gathered here last Thursday night to hear Sergeant Webber deliver an address on Bolshevism, Anarchism and Socialism. The sentiments of the speaker were endorsed by many, but there were also dissatisfied ones who criticized the lecture. Sergeant Webber has made addresses in most every town in the county and has been greeted by large audiences.²⁰

The next day Webber seemed to have spent the afternoon in Cushing, but that evening he went to Perkins. The *Ripley Record* reported that "Quite a number from Free Silver vicinity [a district directly south of Ripley] attended the speaking at Perkins Friday night by Sergeant Webber. All were much pleased with his speech."²¹ Two days later he spoke at Mehan, another boom town on the edge of the Cushing Oil Field. The Mehan correspondent to the *Stillwater Gazette* reported that "Sergeant Webber spoke to a large and appreciative audience here Sunday afternoon. His talk was well received and seemed to please everybody, with one or two exceptions."²²

Sometime in the beginning of the next week, the sergeant was in Yale and the American Legion hosted him at a hastily called special meeting. About fifty were present "on a hot night," and Webber

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spoke for two hours. At the meeting he claimed to have served almost three years with the Gordon Highlanders and Canadian Expeditionary Force and as an instructor for the United States Army upon his return to America. There was no direct mention of his being an "ex-secret service man" as he had told the Stillwater Legion post; Webber's actual service record seemed factually malleable. The *Yale Democrat* reported on the evening:

Sergeant Webber's work carried him into some of the hotbeds of radicalism and I. W. Wism, and after becoming familiar with their methods and efforts to destroy our government and our institutions, he has made it his life's work to oppose their activities and to awaken people to a realization of their duty and their responsibility. He is preaching a thoroughly sound doctrine of Americanism. It is not the purpose of this article to even make an outline of his talk which lasted about two hours; but suffice to say there was no sign of fatigue visible on any of his audience—every bit of his talk was interesting and important.²³

Possibly the truest measure of how rampant nativist ideas were in Payne County at the time is the fact that fifty men, many undoubtedly in wool uniforms, sat listening in a stifling room for two hours, all without "fatigue."

Webber apparently made one more appearance in Payne County. The meandering readers from the Free Silver district reported to the *Ripley Record* that they had again traveled to hear the speaker: "A large crowd from this community attended the public naturalization [initiation] of the K.K.K. east of Cushing last Thursday night [June 28, 1923] The Free Silver bunch enjoyed Sergeant Webber's speech as he unfolded real facts which they have been knowing for years."²⁴

At that point, the roving sergeant seemed to disappear from county records. He was probably a Klansman, but he never claimed to speak for the Klan on the street. His military record seemed a bit shaky but was accepted by the American Legionnaires. It is unclear whether he was from the county or was an itinerant.²⁴ In this cynical age he might have been judged a crazy ranter or, possibly more sinister, a flim-flam man who had found a great scam.

But neither Webber's veracity nor his origins are of great concern. What is important was that he attracted large crowds, including local leaders, who largely agreed with him. Webber's travels through Payne County in that hot summer of martial law and confusion in Oklahoma have some intriguing aspects which illuminate attitudes toward the Klan in Payne County.



The Oilton Klan in Creek County had its own building, shown in this 1984 photo. The building was demolished the next year after suffering damage in a wind storm (Courtesy D. Earl Newsom).

First, Webber's ideas, and those of the Klan, were accepted as part of the public discourse. Both he and the Klan spoke against the threat of radicalism, as did most organizations in the county except possibly the Farmers' Union. The radical danger could have been the "Reds" in Russia, but "radicalism" also brought back memories of the IWW presence in the county during the early days of the Cushing Field.²⁶ That "radicalism" was then linked with anti-foreignism, a jointure also made by the Klan and organizations such as the American Legion and businessmen's groups. He, and the Klan, followed the linkage then to the defense of traditional morals from the "Godless" radicals. Newspapers of the time oozed with what today would be called "traditional family morals." No one spoke against them or clearly defined what "traditional" morals were. Webber and the Klan also stood for a martial nationalism, another feeling never contradicted in the newspapers of the time and one shared by the American Legion.

But Webber was speaking in a county with an established Roman Catholic minority, so the absence of anti-Catholic rhetoric in him and in the local Klan is interesting.²⁷ He also said nothing about race, a subject the Klan in Payne County only mentioned vaguely. All white institutions of the day assumed that the "Negro issue"

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was settled in Jim Crow Oklahoma and that included the Republican and Democratic parties. The small African-American minority in the county was settled and certainly not seen as a threat.²⁸ Most people widely accepted the messages of Webber and the Klan, and gaps in their rhetoric, making allowance for established Catholics and a small, settled black population, showed they were responsive to the particular position of Payne County at that time.²⁹

Some members of the public forum disagreed with those ideas. The sergeant's views, like the Klan's, did polarize an opposition, albeit a seemingly small one. The nativist views of the speaker were not universally accepted. In several of the news reports about Webber, there was mention of people who disagreed, the most obvious being a Mr. Bowline. Webber and the Klan stated their convictions in strong, declarative terms that could be taken as threatening. It is unclear if the aim of the opposition was to the ideas expressed or to the aggressive and reckless delivery of the notions. The one man identified with both opposition to Webber and to the Klan was lawyer Walter Mathews, but he was not alone.³⁰

In another sign of possible opposition to Webber's ideas, most newspapers seemed to distance themselves from him, even though their editorials exhibited many of the same thoughts.³¹ No news-

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KU KLUX KLAN WARNING

First, Last and Only Warning, Advice and Information To—Gamblers, Tin-horns, Boot-leggers, Hijackers, Gunmen, Loufers, Law Breakers of Every Description, I. W. W.s, Bolsheviks and Agitators, Black and White Alike, Old or Young

We Are Here By The Scores and We Are Strong Enough To Take Care of ALL Undesirables and Undesirable Conditions

We Are Soon to Preserve the Sanctity of Homes—The Virtues of Wives, Mothers and Daughters—and Accurately Warn Against the Dirty, Evil-Mouthed Remarks Made About the Women and Girls of Our City and Community

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We Are 100 Per Cent American—Ready to Make Any Sacrifice For Our Country and Community—We Stand Squarely Back of Law and Order and Are Pledged to See That There is a Strict and Impartial Administration of the Same

WE DEMAND That every tin horn gambler, fastag, and this means the gang, which has been hanging around this town for years without legitimate means of support, who never labor; the young men who have time to pass remarks about women and girls who pass him; the booze peddler and booze hoisters; hoolies—committees of adultery—every undesirable of any color or sex who may now be in our city to cease from such activities NOW

Our Patience is Exhausted—The Climate Elsewhere Will Be Better for Those Concerned in This Warning
Be Governed Accordingly

Knights of the Ku Klux Klan

Yale Klan

Realm of Oklahoma

Klan literature typically espoused ideas that were broadly accepted within the community (Taken from the Yale Democrat, December 16, 1921).

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paper carried reports on Webber's full speaking career. The paper that should have been first with the story of the sergeant but never mentioned him was the *Cushing Citizen*.³² The *Citizen* also tried to ignore the Klan, though it did run stories of some of the hooded order's most public events in Cushing. In his fine study of the reaction of ten Indiana newspapers to the Klan, Bradford Scharlott argues that disregarding the Klan was one strategy adopted by opponents in the press. "No reporting" was possibly the best policy because even "objective" reporting publicized and seemingly legitimized the Klan.³³ That paralleled the Payne County press's general approach to both the sergeant and the Klan.

The broad recognition of their ideas gave both Webber and the Klan an acceptance in the county, but that acceptance simply allowed them to speak. What likely made the sergeant and the Klan popular successes was the spectacle. In a county full of men and women who were daily engaged in hard, often isolated, labor with few distractions, anything that broke routine, drew crowds, and was talked about was worth seeing. The "facts" preached by Webber were known or assumed by most his hearers. People did not come to hear Webber or the Klan to learn new "facts"; they came to be part of the event.

At a certain level, the popularity of the sergeant's secular street-preaching and the Klan's public events were similar to the attractiveness of another popular county institution, the Protestant revival. Webber and a revivalist might have talked about different subjects, but part of the appeal of both was in speaking known truths and predictable claims to people who sincerely wanted to hear them. And both created spectacles that incorporated the viewer in something close to a morality play. Evil was exposed, condemned, and attacked, while good triumphed. The sergeant's extravagant speeches reinforced ideas held by most countians and could account for the large crowds that attended his talks.

Like Webber, people tolerated the Klan because the ideas it espoused were broadly accepted. The Klan thrived and gained public notoriety in Payne County not so much by the power of its beliefs but by the power of its spectacle. The hooded Klan could conduct only a limited number of public events, because of its anonymity and the awkwardness of the regalia. The Klan could not help plant public gardens, speak before city councils, or hold dances or picnics. However, the few public activities the Klan engaged in were impressive and undoubtedly designed for effect and drew the biggest crowds the county had ever seen. The parade in Stillwater on the

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evening of July 4, 1922, the third in the county in a three-week span, might have had an audience of 10,000 or more.³⁴ Newspapers documented church visits, always rather militant, formal, disciplined, and unannounced, but in only one case did a paper bother to publish the specific reasons for the visit, given in the note handed to the minister.³⁵

The Klan's most complete spectacle was the "naturalization" at Twin Mounds east of Yale on the night of October 4, 1922. All day, two "aeroplanes" flew above the city publicizing the event. That evening, a plane with a lighted cross cruised above the darkened mounds. The west mound held a crowd estimated at 3,000–5,000 people, with more than 3,000 cars, some distance from the initiation of 300 men on the east mound. The words were hard to hear and were not reported, but the spectacle was enthusiastically described. It all culminated in a large cross on the east summit blazing in the night.³⁶ The Klan, like Webber, displayed great spectacle.

The acceptance and appeal of the Klan in Payne County in the early 1920s had one element the sergeant could not match. The Klan grew and gained prominence because it was a new organization with a common ideology in a time of great institutional growth. When asked why he was often approached and urged to join the Klan in the early 1920s, the late H. F. Donnelly of Stillwater simply said, "It was the thing to do."³⁷ Besides the fine spectacle its public events provided, the Klan benefitted from the "joining" mania of the early 1920s.³⁸ If the ideas of the Klan were tolerated, the large membership claimed by the Klan combined with their spectacles made the Klan in Payne County a public success.

Webber came to Payne County, spoke, and disappeared in a short measure. The Klan also saw a stunning rise in interest and membership and was seemingly a rather healthy organization for several years. After the Walton crisis of 1923 and the de-hooding law of 1924, the Klan rather quickly slid from public prominence in the county.³⁹

The decline of the Klan in Payne County could be due to several factors. First, the Klan's appeal as spectacle was probably mortally wounded by the de-hooding law of 1924. De-hooding gave the Klan the opportunity for a much greater range of public activities, but it also undercut the mystery and awe of the Klan.

In addition, the Klan's ideas, which had allowed for the initial wide acceptance of the Klan in the county, probably helped doom the organization. Those ideas were not unique and in the Klan they were not combined with an identifiable constituency or function.

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The other organizations that pronounced those beliefs had a finite constituency and identifiable functions within the community. The American Legion fought for veterans rights, the WCTU attempted to be moral watchdogs of public education, business groups fought for business interests such as roads and city promotion, and churches tried to save souls. But the Klan's membership was rather amorphous, and its function as an institution in the county never really gelled. In the beginning, businessmen in the Cushing Oil Field area probably perceived the Klan as a useful instrument against labor agitation by the IWW, but by the 1920s the boom days were over, the oil fields were served by a more settled population, and the IWW had moved on to organizing agricultural laborers and newer oil fields.⁴⁰ The Klan's stance against prohibition may have attracted some support, but there was no reported case of the Klan assisting in the capture of a bootlegger, despite the fact that prohibition cases were widely reported and crowded the court dockets. The Klan stood for strict morals, particularly among young people, and there was one hazy report in 1922 of the Klan patrolling highways near Yale at night to stop "petting parties," but that report, if true, was unique and produced no documented results.⁴¹ Aside from a few public events and some well-publicized benevolence, the county's klaverns had no function, particularly after the impeachment of Walton seemed to take away the "radical" political threat. The Klan's ideas, built on conspiracy theories and generalized fears, had nothing to say about the immediate problems of a county going through modernization during a recession.⁴²

Although the decline of the Ku Klux Klan in Payne County is still obscure, viewing the Klan's growth and acceptance in the context of it addressing known ideas and staging great spectacles suggests some of the forces leading to its demise. The demise of its foe, Governor Walton, and the loss of its appeal as a great show by the de-hooding law, rather than any rejection of its ideas or any excessive violence by the Payne County Klan, were likely the factors that led to its demise in 1924 and 1925.

ENDNOTES

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¹ The Payne County census was 30,180 in 1920. If one considers the figures for Protestants and adult males, a Klan membership of 1,800 probably included about 20–25 percent of eligible Protestant adult males, figures that roughly compared to the percentage of its potential population who actually joined the American Legion.

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See U. S., Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States. 1920*, vol. 3, pt. 2, Reports by States, Montana to Wyoming (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], 1923): 169. For the ad, see *Yale (Oklahoma) Democrat*, December 16, 1921.

² See James Lowell Showalter, "Payne County and the Hooded Klan, 1921–1924," (Ph.D. diss., Oklahoma State University, 2000), Appendix I, "Chronology of the Hooded Klan in Payne County, Oklahoma," 326–332.

³ The one act of Klan violence in which countians were accused was the whipping of Walter Mathews, a Cushing lawyer, on September 12, 1922. Of the eighteen (later cited as thirteen) men accused and identified by Mathews, three were from Cushing and two, a prominent banker and a Disciples of Christ minister, were definitely Klansmen. All the accused were acquitted. See *Stillwater (Oklahoma) Advance Democrat*, September 28, 1922; *Stillwater (Oklahoma) Gazette*, October 13, 1922.

⁴ The best summary of the revisionist, or "populist," school of Klan studies is Leonard J. Moore, "Historical Interpretations of the Klan: The Traditional View and the Populist Revision," *Journal of Social History*, 24 (Winter, 1990): 350–354.

⁵ U. S., Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, vol. 3, Population, 1920 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1923): 822.

⁶ The Disciples of Christ had 2,232 members, Northern Methodists 1,989, Southern Baptists 1,668, Presbyterians 785, and Evangelical United Brethren 325. These five main denominations totaled 6,999 members, or 70.2 percent of the total churched in Payne County. All sponsored revivals were open to other denominations and, in Stillwater at least, several denominations held "union" church services during the summer months. See U. S., Bureau of the Census, *Religious Bodies: 1926*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1930): 661–663; U. S., Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in Year 1920*, vol. 3, Population, 1920 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1923): 822; Showalter, "Payne County and the Hooded Klan," 124.

⁷ There were 791 Roman Catholics (8 percent), 740 blacks of various denominations (7.4 percent), 525 classified as "All other bodies" (5.3 percent), and a few Jewish people. See Census Bureau, *Religious Bodies*, 661–663.

⁸ U. S., Bureau of the Census, *Religious Bodies: 1926*, vol. 1, Summary and Detailed Tables (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1930): 661, 663.

⁹ The most recorded minister was Rev. D. C. Mallory of the Methodist Tabernacle in Yale, a man who preached a firmly conservative, even nativist line. For example, see his sermon on "100% Americanism" and the Ku Klux Klan, in which he lauds the Klan while claiming he was not a member, in the *Stillwater Advance Democrat*, January 2, 1922. In the newspapers many churches included short summaries of the previous Sunday's sermons.

¹⁰ On the national decline of fraternalism in the 1920s, see Mark C. Carnes, "Iron John in the Gilded Age," *American Heritage*, 44 (September, 1993): 37–45; Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880–1930* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 156–161, 163.

¹¹ *Stillwater Gazette*, May 25, 1923. For a complete account of the Wilson affair, see Philip Reed Rulon, *Oklahoma State University Since 1890* (Stillwater: Oklahoma State University, 1975), 171–180.

¹² A good account of this can be found in Sheldon Neuringer, "Governor Walton's War on the Ku Klux Klan: An Episode in Oklahoma History, 1923–1924," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 45 (Summer, 1967): 153–179. There has always been the assumption by historians that the state was in a frenzy of vigilante violence, just as the governor claimed. As far as I know, no one has ever attempted to get numbers on reported

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cases of whippings, brandings, or other such violence. The governor's figure of 2,500 such attacks in the previous year would result in almost seven events per day, a rather large number. My argument in this article is that in Payne County, and probably others, the Klan never lived up to its violent reputation and functioned more like an established institution mixing fraternalism with concern about public matters.

¹³ "Street Speaker Stays 'To Lay It On' Moore," *Stillwater Gazette*, June 15, 1923.

¹⁴ *Stillwater Advance Democrat*, September 28, 1922; *Cushing (Oklahoma) Citizen*, October 6, 12, 1922; *Stillwater Gazette*, October 13, 1922; *Cushing Citizen*, October 18, 1923.

¹⁵ "Street Speaker Stays to 'Lay It On' Moore," *Stillwater Gazette*, June 15, 1923.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, "Webber Leaves 'To See Arch Flood At Cushing," *Stillwater Gazette*, June 22, 1923.

¹⁷ "Retracts Statements," *Stillwater Advance Democrat*, June 21, 1923.

¹⁸ "More Stillwater Excitement," *Yale Democrat*, June 21, 1923.

¹⁹ *Ripley (Oklahoma) Record*, June 21, 1923.

²⁰ "Local and Personal," *Ripley Record*, June 28, 1923.

²¹ "Free Silver News," *Ripley Record*, June 28, 1923.

²² "News of the Neighbors," *Stillwater Gazette*, June 29, 1923.

²³ "American Legion Notes," *Yale Democrat*, June 28, 1923.

²⁴ "Free Silver News," *Ripley Record*, July 5, 1923.

²⁵ Webber was not listed in the various city directories available in the Stillwater Public Library from the 1920s. He was obviously not a member of either the Yale or Stillwater American Legion Posts. I have not been able to contact the Cushing American Legion, though I seriously doubt he was a member there.

²⁶ Nigel Anthony Sellars, "Oil, Wheat and Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World in Oklahoma, 1905-1930," (Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1994), 162-213, 259-325.

²⁷ *Yale Democrat*, December 16, 1921. There was anti-Catholic feeling in the county as illustrated by a speaker, "Sister" Mary Ethel, who lectured in Yale. She claimed to be a former nun. See *Yale Democrat*, June 14, 1922. The virtual uniqueness of this event illustrates both the existence of anti-Catholic sentiment and the relative rarity of its public expression. The American Legion differed from the Klan and staunchly defended Catholics and other non-Protestants because, for the Legion, being in a trench in France transcended any religious differences. See William Pencak, *For God and Country: The American Legion, 1919-1941* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), 131-138.

²⁸ Both whites and blacks are condemned in the *Yale Democrat* since a large part of this ad attacked issues of morals. See *Yale Democrat*, December 16, 1921. In one of the few other pronouncements recorded by the Klan, the note handed to Yale minister D. C. Mallory in June, 1922, simply confirmed the Klan's belief in white supremacy, a belief held by virtually all white institutions of the time including both major political parties. See *Yale Democrat*, July 6, 1922.

²⁹ In Enid, a city seventy miles to the west in Garfield County, the Klan began its career with an attack on the black part of town that included intimidation, threatening letters to twenty-five individuals, and the whipping of at least one person. Those actions probably would have been condemned in Payne County but were broadly accepted in Garfield County, even by a newspaper that had been mildly critical of the Ku Klux Klan. See *Enid (Oklahoma) Daily Eagle*, October 28, 1921. The Enid case is interesting because Enid was the seat of the county directly west of Payne County and had an economy based upon both agriculture and wheat.

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These same ideas, spoken today by groups such as the Aryan Nation, are not accepted as part of the public forum. The public forum is malleable and evolving. I have often thought that much of the condemnation heaped on the Klan of the 1920s is due to the inability to see the differences in the place in society occupied by that Klan and the likes of the Klans or Aryan Nation today. The ideas of the 1920s Klan are abhorrent, but that should be seen more broadly as a condemnation of ideas held by a broad segment of Payne County's white Protestant community.

³⁰ The opponents of the Klan actually acted a few months after Webber's speaking spree. In the fall of 1923, adversaries tried to portray Payne County as an area besieged by the Klan. One Cushing policeman, on his own, entered the Klan Hall in Cushing and shot it up, scattering Klansmen in the process. His arrest, and the referendum on calling the legislature into session to impeach the governor, brought an anguished telegram from some Payne countians to the attorney general for troops to restore order. In January, 1924, a petition of citizens forced a grand jury to investigate law and order in the county. Walter Mathews was the plaintiff's attorney. Although the Klan was, with one early exception, non-violent, its national reputation for violence and the opposition to the Klan's ideas seemingly worried more than a few in Payne County.

³¹ The most enthusiastic newspaper for Webber and the Klan was the small *Ripley Record*.

³² One crucial issue of the *Cushing Citizen* is missing during this period. The paper seemed prone to losing issues, especially around times of some crisis. But Webber was around long enough to warrant some remark unless the paper specifically chose to ignore the matter. Editor E. M. Green also chose to ignore nearly all Klan initiations including the one where Webber spoke outside of Cushing. It may have been the policy of this very conservative but rather independent editor to overlook those he considered more conservative than himself.

³³ Bradford W. Scharlott, "The Hoosier Journalist and the Hooded Order: Indiana Press Reaction to the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s," *Journalism History*, 15 (Winter, 1988): 122-131, esp. 130.

³⁴ One Stillwater editor estimated there were 15,000 people in town for day-long events celebrating July 4. The Klan parade started at 9:00 P.M. "Stillwater never saw so many automobiles as were lined along Main and side streets. As the parade, headed by two buglers on horseback, and other horsemen, turned into south Main Street from the east, an unusual quiet spread over the great throng of onlookers. As the marchers passed silently, everything was still." See *Stillwater Gazette*, July 7 1922. Some people were impressed but puzzled. One of the rural correspondents stated that folks in their township "don't see why they want to hide in such robes." See *Stillwater Gazette*, July 14, 1922.

³⁵ The recipient of the note was the outspoken Rev. D. C. Mallory of the Methodist Tabernacle in Yale. The note lauded him for standing for "100% Americanism." It mentioned the "Eternal Supremacy of the White Race" and, in an implicit jab at Roman Catholics, the "Separation of Church and State." *Yale Democrat*, July 6, 1922.

³⁶ *Yale Democrat*, October 5, 1922; *Yale Record*, October 5, 1922; *Ripley Record*, October 12, 1922. The crowd undoubtedly included many from outside the county. It is likely that some of the spectators came purely out of curiosity, for the anonymity of the Klan often kept even families in the dark.

³⁷ Conversation with the late H. F. Donnelly, c. 1997. I knew Mr. Donnelly for many years. I fully believed him when he stated that he never joined the Klan.

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³⁸ As noted above, the 1920s were a "joining" period in the county and many factors might have pushed a white protestant male to join the Klan. To join the American Legion, one needed military experience. There were Legionnaires in the Klan, but for some men the Klan with its military structure and hints of violence may have been a substitute for time not served in the army. Robert Goldberg's study of the Klan in Denver found nearly a complete break between the memberships of the Legion and the Klan and he speculated about the Klan being a substitute for those who did not serve. This did not seem to be the case in Payne County where one, possibly two, of the few known Klansmen were also veterans. See Robert A. Goldberg, "Beneath the Hood and Robe: A Socioeconomic Analysis of the Ku Klux Klan Membership in Denver, Colorado, 1921-1925," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 11 (April, 1980): 187-191. To join the very influential Chambers of Commerce, Rotary, and Lions clubs, one needed to be a business or professional man. Some members of those organizations were Klansmen, but again, the Klan would be an alternative for those of another class. And for many, the Klan may have offered the legitimacy of a fraternal organization with a newer, more activist and public slant. The Klan, pushing traditional, Protestant mores and claiming to be a Christian fraternity, was a religio-moral organization of men, in contra-distinction to what were perceived to be the "feminized" denominational churches. Without a poll of the attitudes and reasons for joining, we will never fully understand the motivation of those who joined the Klan. Undoubtedly, some men enrolled because the ideas were right and a few might have joined in anticipation of the Klan's national reputation for violence. This is probably the greatest weakness of the "revisionist" historiography on the Klan which has appeared in the last decades, fueled by the appearance of various Klan rolls and rosters. Ultimately, these studies still deal in assumptions based on the economics, ethnicity, religio-social, and other broad measures of the make-up of the community to explain what drove individual men to join and support the Klan. I argue that there were often quite immediate, non-ideological reasons why men entered the Klan, gave public support to the Klan, or flocked to hear Sergeant Webber.

³⁹ The 1926 city directories still listed Klan halls in Stillwater and Cushing. Unfortunately, the next available directory is for 1938 and no hall was listed. See *Polk's Stillwater, Cushing, and Yale Directory: 1926-27* (Kansas City: R. L. Polk and Company, 1926); *1938 Stillwater City Directory* (Stillwater, Oklahoma: Crossman Multilith and Printing Company, 1938). D. Earl Newsom claims that the Klan in Drumright, sister city to Cushing but in neighboring Creek County, "declined rapidly after masks were gone and anonymity was no longer possible." By 1930 the Klan was no longer very active in that city. See D. Earl Newsom, *Drumright! The Glory Days of a Boom Town* (Perkins, Oklahoma: Evans Publications, 1985), 118. In personal conversations with Newsom, he agrees with me that the Klan declined rapidly in Payne County after the de-hooding in 1924 and probably was declining before then.

⁴⁰ D. Earl Newsom, in conversations, also has agreed that businessmen and business interests initially led the Klan and that Klan activities were almost entirely within the geographic bounds of the Cushing Field.

⁴¹ *Yale Record*, August 31, 1922.

⁴² The Klan said nothing to farmers about their straitened economic situation, but the Farmers' Union did and grew quickly. The Klan said nothing about improving roads, but the Chambers, Rotary, Lions, and other groups did. The Klan said nothing specific about improving schools, but most other city organizations did. In effect, the Klan had no real function for an identified constituency or an identifiable effect on major problems in the life of the communities.